"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE RURAL CHURCH IN ITS WORLD PERSPECTIVE

By Dr. Richard O. Comfort*

When John Wesley said, "The world is my parish," he was covering a lot of territory. For three months I, too, have "covered a lot of territory." I have seen the work of the village church in some twelve countries of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. As I traveled through today's changing world, my observations led to a number of convictions, some of which are especially urgent.

1. The significance of the Christian Church Today

The Christian faith stands for a way of life expressed by love. It speaks of truth to a world seeking truth. It tells of a way of salvation in a world desperately seeking salvation from war, insecurity, materialism, and secularism.

We who have the responsibility of sharing our faith with others have also the obligation of demonstrating that we believe what we say. It is well to examine ourselves, for we may fall short of expressing fully our Christian principles, both in our personal lives and in the work of our Church.

The Christian religion is challenged not only by resurgent non-Christian beliefs, but also by those who actually deny the existence of God. We cannot afford to be complacent while our Russian friends compile a list of "firsts" in the rocket race and other technical areas. One cannot live long in many Asian countries before he feels the struggle in the minds and hearts of the millions trying to determine the best kind of life and how to work toward attaining it. However strongly we believe the Christian way of life will bring fulfillment to all men, we do not know what the outcome of the struggle will be.

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* Delivered at the National Convocation on the Church in Town and Country, Louisville, Kentucky, October 20-22, 1959.

2. The Moral Responsibility of the West

The Church in the West has a moral responsibility to continue helping the churches in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East during these days of transition. The terms "Home Missionary"and "Foreign Missionary" do not fit the tempo of today. In this one world we must think of one mission of the Christian Church.

For East and West are meeting in diverse ways. That many nations have gained their independence in the last several years indicates a robust spirit among peoples long hopeless; in some cases the Christian Church has been identified, rightly or wrongly, with the colonial powers recently removed, not without bloodshed. People in such countri are sensitive about their position in the world.

We can best understand the present situation of the Church in these foreign lands, and better approach the future, by reviewing briefly the immediate past. During the depression there was a twenty year period when few missionaries were assigned abroad. Then, in the last ten or fifteen years many younger people were sent out. Since World War II, in fact, smaller denominations in the United States have been especially active in the foreign missionary field. Thus some missionaries have served their whole lives abroad; others have come after a considerable gap in time.

It is inevitable that there should be some disagreements between these two groups. The result of this and other factors has been that many young people have not returned to the mission field after their first furlough. Some of these factors are:

a) It is thought in some countries that the people should now operate their own church. In India, for example, leaders feel that no missionary should do a job that a qualified Indian could do.

b) There is increasingly an opinion that foreign money and personnel, when not used properly, may dominate the work of the Church, thus hampering its independent growth.

c) National Church leaders still hesitate somewhat to speak their minds freely in the presence of missionaries.

d) Many of the young people whose training has been highly specialized find it difficult to use their special talents and training in a church that does not know how to use them.

Recognizing the fact that the function of the missionary is, and should be, different today from that of fifteen or twenty years ago, older denominations have been rethinking their mission policy. Instead of a Board of Foreign Missions, the United Presbyterian Church now has a Commission on Ecumenical Missions and Relations, calling its foreign missionaries "Fraternal Workers." In many countries the work

of the mission and that of the church have become integrated. In fact, the Church itself within a country, rather than one in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, or Atlanta, is now frequently assigning workers their tasks. National leaders are asking for those who will work with them to build a strong, self-supporting, self-propogating church.

It was often asked of me if we could not do a more scientific job in the future than we have in the past. Such an approach is identified by two clear precepts:

a) Since much of the work of the Church is experimental, the logical sequence of the laboratory should be applied: (a) A clear statement of the goal; (b) an outline of the procedures to be used; (c) careful records of each step in the experiment; (d) evaluation of both success and failure; and (e) conclusion of the usefulness of the project.

b) Communication of the results of experiments should be immediate and widespread. We must find ways of distributing such information, so that all may profit.

The moral responsibility of the Church in the West, then, is recognition of the new strength found in all countries; the willingness to help each other across boundaries; and the ability both to share with and to learn from, those leaders now emerging in the churches abroad. There has been too much one-way traffic in the ecumenical movement; too much of it has been from West to East.

3. Present Opportunities of the Village Church

It is reliably estimated that there are at least 72,000 village churches and 35,000 village pastors at work in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. A friend who sells insurance said recently, "What I wouldn't give for a sales force like that!"

The village church can help transform village life; or it may itself conform to local conditions. Too often the latter happens. A clear concept of the function of the local church is often lacking. Many such churches offer two preaching services a month, with no further program. The first emphasis of the early missionaries in India, for example, was evangelistic, resulting in a mass movement of people into the Christian Church. Whole villages became Christian at one time. Schools and hospitals were established to care for educational and physical needs of the people.

During the next period, Christians were organized into districts. A three year study conducted by the World Council of Churches found that we need now to emphasize work at the village level.

4. The Challenge of the Village People

Making up about 85% of the population of these countries, village people are on the move today. All one need do is ride a train or a bus in any of these areas to see how people are moving about in this

year 1959. Trains, buses, and cars are everywhere crowded.

The great numbers of shifting village people will strongly influence the social and economic structure of the world. Whether thousands move into industrial areas, or even more thousands remain in the villages, they will yearn for and struggle toward improvement of their conditions. While many spend most of their time seeking the physical necessities of life, they are conscious also of their spiritual needs. It is true that better agricultural methods, health measures, industrial encouragement, are essential; but it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that village people know life's needs include more than bread. The spiritual concept of service and mutual help is vital in developing and maintaining a pattern of living for these people.

5. The Need for Richer Programs

In accepting the moral responsibilities of the Western Church, the opportunities in village churches, and the challenge of village peoples, we must assume the task of setting up real programs. The usual elements we in the United States consider necessary are often non-existent.

The typical village church in India and Pakistan consists of groups of Christian people from several villages; in Thailand there is usually one church to each village, a one-room, mud-brick building. In India one pastor may serve as many as fifteen or twenty villages, usually riding a bicycle from service to service, making a few calls en route. He has little time for and usually little training in, stewardship education, pastoral calling, the training of lay leaders. In only a few parishes the church has begun village reconstruction work.

Analysis of this lack of programming reveals several causes. The obvious poverty, poor roads, political and economic confusion, are long-term problems. An immediate and remediable cause is the insufficient training of the pastors assigned to these areas. When theological institutions balance their curriculum with technical and sociological training, rural programs will become enriched.

6. Required Training for Ministers and Lay Leaders

It is not difficult to understand why such training has been lacking in the past when we remember that most of the theological institutions have been patterned after the European system. This means a strong classical emphasis on theological education, with little or no training in the practical work of the Church. While during recent years interest in these functions has increased, three problems in particular face theological schools:

a) The lack of library resources is a handicap. Almost all the books are in English; in many schools few students read English well enough for this literature to be helpful.

b) The curricula of most schools are full and over-flowing. One of the hardest things to do is to remove a course from the curriculum of a theological seminary. Nor is it profitable merely to add practical courses to an over-loaded curriculum.

c) The number of people prepared by experience and graduate work for such teaching is limited.

It was my privilege to visit with faculty and students of twelve theological schools and colleges. In several countries there is a readiness to face frankly the implications in the need for a more specific practical training. But they must look to the United States at present for financial help, library resources, and specially trained teachers. Our friends in other lands see the significance of the rural church, of agricultural missions, and of the various programs of community development. We have something to share with these people, and much to learn from them. For in deciding on training courses, we must realize that our ways are not always best for other areas. Frank discussion and exchange of ideas will be helpful to us all.

7. Education by Way of Extension

Never before has there been so much interest in the welfare of village people, nor so much money and help available. While in Rome I talked with several people in the Food and Agricultural Organization about how the Church might work with them more closely. Everyone was in favor of this idea, and suggested ways in which it could be done.

For two reasons, the extension method which has been basic in our own agricultural growth, is also the answer in our work abroad.

a) Illiteracy: How to get information to the village person in a language he can understand presents the first problem. It is useless to give him a book, for more often than not he is illiterate. Even if he is literate, much of the necessary information is not written in words he can understand.

b) Resistance to change: A lecture does not help, for most villagers feel that advice from government officials or Westerners is inapplicable to their problems. Experiments which may have failed have frightened them back to their own methods; they have neither

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the time nor the money to waste on the unproven.

It is mighty hard to convince a villager that if he will sprinkle some commercial fertilizer around on his pepper plants he will grow bigger and better peppers. It is understandably hard for a villager living in North India, where wood is scarce, to believe he should use cattle manure for fertilizer rather than for cooking fuel. The extension worker who shows how these things can be done is more likely to convince through demonstration.

Extension work is not, of course, confined to agricultural procedures. Villagers may improve their economic status through cottage industries promoted by extension. Child care, home cooking and sewing, nutritional instruction--these and many other activities are fertile ground for extension workers, whether lay or Church.

8. The Church and Cooperatives

At the World Council of Churches Conference in Salonika, Greece, this past July, it was recommended that the Church work with the International Cooperating Alliance in establishing cooperatives. Here is a present opportunity to join forces with a materially endowed organization; the rural church worker who is close to his people is of inestimable value both to the agency itself and to the village folk.

Let me use India to illustrate the situation. Part of the Government Community Development Program in India is the establishment in every village of a multi-purpose cooperative. The need for this is apparent to all who examine conditions in Indian villages.

All governments seem to work in about the same way; India is merely an example. Decisions are made in the Capital, handed down through the States--or Districts--to the village. A staff of experts is employed at various levels, through a chain of command from top to bottom. The man at the top expects the man below him to do the work and report to him. So it goes, down to the man who is called the village level worker. This young man, usually with limited training and experience, is expected to produce results, or at least reports, of work done, so that it can be published in the Capital.

Thus is a self-defeating system evolved. As a friend in India remarked, "We are hitting all the targets in our program, but missing the people." The usual method of organizing a cooperative under these circumstances is as follows: The cooperative expert visits a village, calling the people together. In the process of explaining the cooperative, he indicates that those who join will be able to borrow money at a low interest rate. Since everyone is eager for this happy situation, many sign for this purpose alone. This having been accomplished, the expert has a cup of tea with the mayor, and moves on to the next village. Because he is so busy organizing these cooperatives, he has no time to service them or follow up with an educational program for their continued efficiency. The result is that many such cooperatives die in their first year of life.

One of the most helpful contributions the Church could make at this time would be to demonstrate how a real cooperative could be started from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Consequently we are working on a plan which we believe will serve this purpose. Drawing upon the knowledge and financial support of the cooperative movement in the United States, we shall endeavor to help launch a real, down-to-earth cooperative education program in several countries.

Government workers are not alone in their disappointments; enthusiastic rural workers of the Church have also met with heartache, for several reasons:

a) Lack of necessary technical knowledge

b) Lack of actual experience

c) Lack of personnel especially appointed to stay with the job.

Again referring to India to illustrate a point, there is too much at stake for half-jobs, least of all in the matter of cooperatives. If the third five-year plan now being projected is not more successful than the first two have been, many fear real trouble. In a land where interest rates are often from 15% to 30% the well-run credit union could save many a villager from ruin. The possibilities of self-help are limitless in other types of cooperatives such as producers, consumers, and marketing.

To those who doubt that cooperative work is rightly the function of the Church, let me quote the words of a Communist in India, who asked me, "Why don't you Christians take care of the spiritual needs of the people in India, and let us take care of the economic needs? We would be glad to make that kind of trade!" A poorer trade for Christians can scarcely be imagined. For me, it would be a betrayal of Christian faith. Jesus was concerned with all aspects of man's life. As His Followers, we can do no less.

9. Lay Resources and the Church

One does not travel far afield today before he discovers Americans doing governmental work in community development. In India I met people from Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois, Tennessee, and Washington State, all working on some phase of Government program. These men and women are experts in a particular technical field, and are in the country for a two or three year period. Many are good Christian people, doing a good job, notwithstanding some truths in the recently published The Ugly American. Many would like to work with the Church, and could work with it, if they knew how to make the contact.

One of the unmet opportunities for us in the United States is a plan whereby members of our churches who are going abroad may become informed about the work of the Church in foreign lands. I suggest a few simple things that anyone can do who knows of a person who is to serve his government for a period of time outside the country.

a) Ask him to serve his home church abroad by bringing back information about work of the church in the country to which he is going.

b) Discover the names of missionaries or church leaders by writing to your Board or Foreign or Ecumenical Missions. Give him these names, together with information about their work, and suggest he meet them soon after his arrival.

c) Write a note to these people, telling them about your friend, and suggest ways in which he might be of help to the Church while he is serving in their area.

10. The Ecumenical Approach

Having viewed and participated in the ecumenical movement in different places and from different points of view, and being committed to it as an absolute necessity, I am deeply troubled by what I have seen.

a) The ecumenical movement tends to be made up of a relatively few professionals, employed to be "ecumeniacs" for the rest of the Christians, who think it is a good idea, but are too busy being denominational to grapple seriously with the theological and practical implications. This is often true in our own country as well as in foreign lands where the ecumenical movement is less highly organized.

b) The ecumenical movement is likely to break down of its own weight. "Committeeitis" plays havoc with both time and efficiency. One mu adjourn one committee meeting early in order to get to another, an send regrets to two others he ought to be attending.

c) The ecumenical movement is still trying to find its place and meth of working in a world of long and traditional loyalties.

As I sat in ecumenical meetings in widely separated countries this summer, I sensed a dissatisfaction with the present, a longing for bette understanding and harmony, a desire for more complete dedication to God. The urgency of meeting the needs of His people is forcing us to think again of ways to work together. We are only beginning to see how the Church of Jesus Christ can unitedly make an impact on a divided world yearning to become one. We must be positive; we must strive to share with people rather than to impose our wills and ways upon them.

What we see calls upon Christians for every resource. We may no longer hide behind the curtain of provincialism. Those of us who profess to be Christians must join the crusade for a world whose peoples seek to understand each other's problems. Only in such a world will ultimate peace be found.

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